

Child of the Chaos

By Rhianna Pratchett



To Mike with love and thanks

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That which separates one world from another is in fact very little. Or at least it is for those who know where to find the doorways, or are powerful enough to create their own. For all other self-aware creatures, the enormity of such possibilities is best left to the realms of bedtime stories and over-active imaginations. After all, what use is it to know that there's a hidden doorway in your pumpkin field that leads to a world populated entirely by little blue lizards, when the harvest needs gathering and the cows need milking? Most creatures don't need (or even want) to know that such doorways, or rifts as they are also known, exist. But exist they do.

For an extremely skilled magic user who possesses the gift of rift-sight, passing between worlds is just a case of opening their mind to the possibility of dimensional travel, locating one of these invisible doorways and, if at all possible, knowing what's on the other side. Few possess the necessary skills, although you'll find those that do never go without several spare changes of clothes (usually basic peasant and noble dress), a variety of currencies, string, bandages and something sharp and pointy.

Although these doorways can crop up anywhere, they are often found in places of religious significance such as temples, statues or - much to the distress of one particular priest - a church font. There has been much speculation that these portals have actually been put in place by the gods themselves, in order to aid their inter-worldly travel. This is more or less true.

Gods and goddesses, being notoriously nosey entities, do like to take the odd short trip to whichever mortal world suits their fancy, especially if they have a vested interest in its inhabitants. The more restless gods have been known to wander through different worlds for many years, creating dimensional doorways and changing shape or costume to suit their mood. This is not so much for the need to be in disguise, but because dressing up is half the fun.

Some gods are quite tidy about their dimensional travel and will politely close doorways after their curiosity has been satisfied. However, some of the more butterfly-minded deities have been known to forget where they last opened a door and simply wander on to the next world. Generally, most gods like to keep these doorways open for emergency use, just in case a good war happens and they fancy a ringside seat.

Of course, the dimensional doorways that lead to the realm that the gods themselves inhabit (which in itself encompasses all worlds) are protected by many powerful spells. This is as much for the mortal creatures as it is for the gods, since it's hard to form a religion around someone if you can just walk into their kitchen.

With the Great War almost over, the use of these doorways is now far more common. Relatively unseen by the eyes of mortal creatures, the War has raged for many thousands of years. It originally started when many of the worlds were young and still forming. It was then that the gods fought against the demon lords for a share of the hearts and minds of the miscellaneous creatures that struggled forth from the primordial soup beneath them.

But conflicts between gods and demons can have unforeseen consequences, for

the body and blood of such figures can be vast and decidedly potent by mortal standards. When the sounds of battle filled the skies, accompanied by much thunder and lightning (which wasn't strictly necessary, but both gods and demons have a penchant for the dramatic), the occasional fleck of scale or drop of blood found its way to the ground beneath. Where these fell, the origins of new races grew. These gradually inter-bred with the terrestrial creatures and evolved in their own struggle for survival. All apart from one drop of blood that fell on a small hill in Northern Rivellon and spawned a particularly nice crop of petunias.

When these battles were over and the participants returned to their respective realms, the gods - who really had nothing better to do - started to bicker and fight among each other for little more motivation than to pass the time. This would have continued unceasingly, had not the creatures on the worlds below started to become self-aware and interesting. And so it was that weapons were laid down in favour of watching and, from time to time, a bit of interfering.

Right now, they're watching a baby.

~o8o~

The little boy gurgled happily as he tottered around on the rug in front of the fire. Behind him, dragged by one ear, was a small cloth bunny-rabbit that was soggy from repeated chewing. Lucian, his mentor, observed him closely and stroked his chin. It had been over a year now and so far the boy, who he named Damian, hadn't been showing any demonic tendencies, which came as something of a relief.

He knew that he couldn't be there all the time to oversee the upbringing of the child - his work prevented that. And after all, the Black Ring members weren't exactly lining up outside his door to be vanquished. In fact, these days they had become more elusive than ever and the paladins who made up his Divine army were spending more time playing cards in the local inn than they were on the battlefield.

Still, at least Floree, Lucian's elderly housekeeper and Damian's nurse, hadn't reported anything unusual about the child. He was certainly very intelligent and quick to learn, but in all other respects he seemed as grubby and sticky as any child of his age. For that, Lucian was thankful.

A soft thump distracted him from his thoughts and he saw that Damian was now sitting, podgy legs outstretched, in the middle of the rug inspecting his toy for any bits that hadn't been given a good chewing lately and muttering 'Bun, Bun, Bun' to himself. Well, something had to be done about that rabbit for a start - it needed a good wash, at the very least. Its daily dragging had left it a perpetual, dirty grey colour, though Damian seemed determined - to the point of floods of tears - not to part with it.

Lucian reached into his leather saddlebag and took out a brightly coloured, tinkling ball. This was much to the delight of his hunting dog Monty, who'd been asleep in his basket next to Lucian's chair with his legs in the air, in the manner of all truly contented animals.

The toy seemed unnecessarily gaudy to Lucian but, according to the merchant who'd sold it to him, that was the sort of thing that young children liked and since Lucian had never had children of his own, he had to concede. The bells inside the ball would undoubtedly drive Floree to the brink of madness, but it was certainly worth a shot, if only to give the rabbit a quick wash in the laundry tub.

'Look, Damian, look at the ball,' he said, waving it in front of the boy. 'Look what I've got for you, pretty ball, pretty ball...' Damian looked up and his eyes widened as he saw something new and unchewed in his vicinity. Still holding the rabbit, he got up and toddled forwards. Lucian shook the ball and held it out to him. Damian started to reach out and, realising that he would need two hands to deal with this latest fascination, dropped the rabbit on the rug.

Seeing his chance, Lucian stretched his hand out for the toy, but Damian wasn't going to be fooled that easily. Dropping the ball and shouting 'Bun!' the boy made a grab for the rabbit. Lucian tried to pull it out of his reach, but instead the saliva-dampened toy slipped through his grasp, flew through the air and landed in the fire.

'Well at least that had sorted out having to wash the wretched thing,' thought Lucian. But Damian was determined that his cloth playmate should not escape him and, before Lucian could catch him, he reached his chubby little arm into the flames and pulled the smoldering rabbit out.

Horrified, Lucian scooped Damian up and ran outside to the horses' water trough. Monty started running around, madly barking at the sudden rush of movement. Damian burst into tears as Lucian plunged him into the cold water, sobbing uncontrollably as he splashed water over the boy's arm. After a few minutes of this, he took the snuffling child back inside to look at what damage the fire had done.

Damian's sleeve was burned-through in several places and the child was visibly in shock, but when Lucian pulled back the material he saw that the skin underneath, although a little pink from the cold water, was smooth and unharmed. Lucian held Damian close, rocking him gently to ease his sobs, and whispered soothing words. In truth, he knew that these were as much for him as they were for the child.

Later that evening, after Floree had put Damian to bed, Lucian took a candle upstairs to Damian's room. He shooed-out Monty, who'd bedded down at the end of the crib and looked at the small boy who was sleeping peacefully with his fist clutched tightly around a dry, but slightly blackened, rabbit. He wondered what the future had in store for his adopted son.

The day he'd found Damian, lying upon the altar of the Lord of Lies, placed there as the new earthly body for the reincarnation of the Damned One, he'd thought about killing him and finishing the job before any evil could flourish. But in the end, he turned away from it, knowing that he could not use his blade on an innocent babe. Instead, he turned his attention to tracking down and destroying every last member of the Black Ring - the Damned One's devoted followers.

Lucian had vowed to bring up the child as his own. Even if a darker evil did lie within the boy's heart, surely an upbringing in the house of the Divine One (a title he may have earned but didn't care to use very often) could abate or even reverse this completely?

Nothing in this world was certain, that was for sure, and while Lucian didn't rate his divinity nearly as highly as others did (for the simple reason that having a head that could fit through doorways was a necessity in his line of work), he hoped that some of it might rub off on his ward. If it didn't then, well...Lucian didn't really want to think about that. After all, Zandalor had warned him that if the boy showed any signs of evil, he must be destroyed or Rivellon would pay the price.

But for now, thought Lucian, let him sleep and bathe in gentle dreams. For the nightmares would come soon enough, he knew that much. Quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeping boy, Lucian placed the candleholder on the table beside the crib and went downstairs. In the corner of the room, his sword blade shone in the flickering light and somewhere, in a distant realm out of the reach of mortal-kind, a nasal voice said: **'Who'll give me odds on the kid?'**

~o8o~

As Damian got older, Lucian was careful to shield him from any rumours surrounding his origins. For many years this was a simple task, as the young Damian was preoccupied with not much more than running around, shouting and getting muddy in the countryside surrounding Lucian's farm. Damian's guardian was content to let the boy wander where he liked (within reason), as long as he didn't stray too far from familiar territory, stay out after dark or bring home any creatures that would upset Floree.

Lucian was still mindful to keep an eye on the boy, for although he was bright, he was also very inquisitive - and that can be a highly dangerous combination, especially for a child with possible latent magical tendencies. He also suspected that his own eyes weren't the only ones to be watching Damian, either - though he was reassured that his army would alert him if there were any suspicious characters within a five mile radius of the village.

At first, Lucian had been glad for the rest. It gave him time to tend to his farm and reflect back upon the days before he arrived in the healer village of Aleroth, back when all he wanted was a hot meal and a woman who looked good in a leather breastplate. Knowing that he was the Divine One hadn't made things any easier, either. As Floree liked to gleefully tell anyone who came to the farm, being the protector of law and order didn't mean that he knew how to use a dirty washing basket, or keep a shirt clean for five minutes. Privately, he also knew that before he became the Divine One his relations with the law hadn't been ideal either - although, according to Zandalor, the gods like to make sure the most interesting characters find themselves in the most inappropriate positions.

Lucian's title had brought with it more adventure than he could possibly have wished for. Dispatching the Lord of Lies was just the start, for the Black Ring had spread his evil throughout the land and even with an army of paladins, Lucian knew that he was unlikely to see order restored within his own lifetime. Still, years of killing necromancers, witches and warlocks had left him with a strong constitution and a sword-arm like a sackful of water melons, which was some consolation.

The break from battle had also allowed Lucian to devote more time to his son - and the longer he spent in Damian's company, teaching him basic sword-play and riding, the further away he could keep the boy from his dark heritage. Lucian was careful only to teach Damian a few low-level protection rituals, and although the boy picked up on these almost immediately and constantly pestered to be taught more, Lucian was dubious about letting him loose with more powerful magic.

Again, the gods were to blame for the release of magic into the worlds; the more they explored, the more magic energies they left behind them like litter. The energy swirled around, unseen, until it found an appropriate host. Most magic users are taught how to make themselves receptive to these magical energies and thereby harness and adapt it to their needs. Naturally, magic cannot be wielded by just anyone - the gods have seen to that, mere training not being enough - because you have to be a certain type of person to use magic. And by far the most powerful magic users are the ones that are born with it in their blood.

Unrestrained magic, especially in the hands of the inexperienced, can often be

very damaging (more often than not, to the caster themselves). Wielding magic is not just about learning the incantations and the hand gestures; it's more like training a pet.

They say that pets and owners grow to look alike, and magic is the same. In creatures blessed with powers from birth, their magic is very much an external projection of their inner being. To put it simply, you won't find the good wielding 'bad' magic and you won't find those of an evil disposition dressed like flowers and sprinkling fairy dust on babies. Well, only if it was particularly *sharp* fairy dust.

As for Lucian, he was neither born with magic, nor was he strictly taught it. Instead, when the Divine Being had been split and became part of him, thus making him the Divine One, the magic just came with the job. This had its own inherent difficulties; it was rather like walking all your life on two legs and then suddenly waking up one day to find you'd grown two more. Wrestling to control his newly found magical powers had nearly been the death of him and he certainly wasn't about to awaken such things in Damian.

Despite this, Lucian was painfully aware that, even with Damian just approaching twelve years old, this decision may already be out of his hands. His suspicions had grown the previous week when Floree informed him that Damian hadn't come back from his daily ride. He'd gone out that morning on his little bay pony, which he'd tamed from a wild foal, and hadn't returned all day. Saddling his own war horse, an enormous grey called Goliath, Lucian had ridden out into the surrounding farmlands, where one of the farmers told him he'd seen the boy only an hour ago riding towards Oakland Woods.

Fearing that Damian might have been hurt, Lucian wasted no time in spurring Goliath into a canter and heading for the woods. Rather than being the dark and foreboding place that narrative conventions often dictate for the site of lost children, the woods were a relatively sun-dappled and charming place. Spring bluebells carpeted the ground, birds sang in the bushes and squirrels chased each other through the canopy. In fact, it looked more charming than ever and this somehow made Lucian feel incredibly uneasy.

Slowing Goliath to a trot, Lucian headed further into the woods, calling out Damian's name. He was about to give up, convinced that the boy must have passed through the woods and taken the long route home, when he heard a soft crying. Lucian dismounted, tied Goliath to a tree and started to track the source of the sound.

Pushing his way through some briar bushes, he came upon an extraordinary sight. Lying on the ground were three orcs. Lucian was pretty sure they were dead, as living orcs tended to have their heads attached to their necks, and more blood on the inside. In the centre of the bodies was Damian. He was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest, staring at his hands, which seemed to be red and bloody where he'd dug his nails into the skin.

Lucian immediately ran to him and pulled him to his feet. As he turned to look at his mentor, his eyes bloodshot from crying, it seemed for all the world as if the boy didn't recognise him. Lucian shook him gently, but Damian just stared ahead as if watching some invisible feature in the middle-distance. Then, without warning, he fainted into a crumpled heap.

Lifting the boy up in his arms, Lucian took him back to Goliath, who was grazing quietly, and laid him gently over the horse's broad neck. On returning to the clearing, he decided to examine the orc bodies more closely. He picked up a piece of fallen armour. The pattern certainly wasn't familiar, which meant that the raiders hadn't come from one of the local orcish clans. In fact, it didn't even look like a proper pattern, or even a language: it just seemed to be a mass of swirls.

The heads had been severed cleanly from their bodies and lay a few feet away, mouths gasping, in what seemed to Lucian to be surprise - a rare emotion to see in any orc, dead or alive. Glancing down, Lucian noticed that each orc had the same wound on the left side of its chest. Yet the wounds in the grey flesh were not bloody, for they had been perfectly cauterised. The orcs had had their hearts burnt out.

Securing the boy on the horse, Lucian rode back to the town. 'A snake must have spooked the pony,' he told Floree. 'He's hit his head pretty hard, put a cold flannel on his forehead and put him straight to bed.' Later, one of his paladins brought Damian's pony back to the farm. Its legs were cut by brambles and it kept tossing its head and letting out a high-pitched whinnying. No matter how hard he tried, the pony refused to be saddled and Lucian knew that, during the brief few hours that had passed, the creature had become wild again.

Meanwhile, quite a crowd had started to gather in the distant realm. Even the gods who were involved in petty squabbles with each other about the height of neighbouring mountain ranges, put down their weapons and came to look. It was all going rather well and they'd hardly had to interfere at all.

~o8o~

Damian had regained consciousness by the time they'd reached the farm, but he appeared to have no recollection of what had happened in the woods and, even though the merest suspicion flashed across Lucian's mind that the boy might be trying to hide something, he thought it best not to dwell on it. He put Damian to bed and spent the night worrying about how he was going to answer the inevitable questions that would be asked, once the bodies were found. In the morning, he roused Goliath and went out to the woods again on the pretence of an early morning ride.

But when he reached the clearing again, he found it completely empty. There was no trace of the bodies, not even spots of blood. Whoever or whatever had removed them had cleaned the ground and even re-straightened the grass, or at least sown the quick-growing type. It was clear that there was a presence out there that wanted all evidence of what had happened in the clearing to vanish, even more than Lucian did.

When he returned to the farm, Damian was sound asleep. Lucian checked his hands and saw that the marks the boy had made from digging into his own flesh had almost completely vanished. Thankfully, there was no angry orc lynch-mob trying to break down the door, either, and no one asking difficult questions, not even Zandalor. It was almost serene and Lucian fervently wished that it would stay that way.

And it had, almost suspiciously so. Despite ordering his paladins to patrol a wider sweep of the area, no more orcs were spotted. Lucian himself went back into Oakland Wood and beyond a few more times, but nothing seemed amiss. At first he'd tried tracking the path the orcs had taken to the clearing but, even with his heightened senses, the trail was very hard to follow. There were a few broken branches here and there, a slightly crushed flower - certainly things an untrained eye would miss - but the trail seemed to break a short way from the clearing and, despite all his efforts, Lucian couldn't pick it up again.

There was always a chance that the orc party was summoned to the area. That would certainly explain why their presence had not been picked up by the paladins. But transporting a party of creatures from one place to another was no easy task. Even some of the most powerful mages in the land sometimes had trouble just finding their own way from place to place, let alone three such sizeable creatures. Then again, most of the mages Lucian knew had trouble finding a matching pair of socks.

When Zandalor dropped by on one of his numerous visits, Lucian was careful not to let anything slip about Damian and the orcs. Although Zandalor was a well-respected wizard of some power, and almost like an uncle to Damian, being the Divine One had its benefits and Lucian knew that Zandalor didn't have a spell powerful enough to read anything in his mind that he didn't want the wizard to know.

'Damian is growing up into a fine boy, Lucian. You've done well with him,' he commented one evening, as they shared a few pipes of Zandalor's home-grown tobacco and watched Monty try to catch rabbits in the field.

'He's certainly a lively lad, nearly drives poor old Floree to tears with his pranks. Last week, he found a pair of my leggings hanging in the orchard to dry and he took them down and

sewed the bottoms of the legs up! Then the little demon put a couple of frogs inside them and of course when Floree came to fetch the washing in, they started hopping about trying to get free. She thought the leggings had come to life and locked herself in her room for the rest of the day, leaving us with only bread and cheese for dinner!’

Zandalor chuckled to himself ‘Ah well, boys will be boys. We’ve all been there. He’s growing up, though, and obviously getting bored here. You can’t expect plants and flowers and running about with the other children to hold his attention forever.’

‘I know, I know, Zandalor. I just don’t quite know what to do with him,’ said Lucian, who was rapidly becoming aware that the smoke from Zandalor’s home-grown tobacco seemed to have some kind of life of its own. Currently, it appeared to be trying to stroke his hair. ‘I suspect the time has come to find him some kind of a job, Zandalor. I thought, perhaps, a blacksmith?’

‘A noble profession, indeed...bending the elements, very grounded too,’ muttered the wizard, chewing on the end of his pipe and letting a wisp of smoke drift from his mouth and towards the ground, where it started to chase Monty. ‘But somehow I think that Damian is going to need something where he can stretch his wings a little - in a controlled environment, of course. The lad needs to see a bit more excitement in his life than just smelting metal!’

‘Yes, you’re probably right,’ sighed Lucian. ‘There goes my potential source of cheap weaponry! Do you have any idea what might be good for the boy?’

‘Well, why not let him join your paladins, Lucian, or at least let him train with some of the lower ranks? They’re good folk, very honest and loyal. They’ll see that the boy learns discipline and honour.’

‘It’s certainly an idea. I just hope he won’t be too much trouble for them. I don’t want them to feel like they’re babysitting him. I know some of them have heard rumours about how I found Damian and what he might become, but I don’t think they would dare show any ill-feeling towards the boy. Besides, many of them have watched him grow up.’

‘Well that’s decided then, m’boy.’ Zandalor clapped a wrinkled hand on Lucian’s shoulder. ‘But leave it for another year, eh? Give the lad a bit more freedom to be a child, while he still can. But, mind you, don’t leave it longer than that. I’ve got a twinge in my right knee that tells me something big is on its way.’

So Lucian waited and, on Damian’s thirteenth birthday, the boy started his training as a paladin.

~o8o~

As Lucian had hoped, even the paladins who didn’t know him warmed to the enthusiastic young boy joining their ranks and he became something of a pet to them, running around doing chores in exchange for sword-fighting and divination lessons. To Damian’s delight, Lucian had even let him move out of the farmhouse and set up his own little bed in the paladins’ quarters. He figured the boy would be just as safe there, under the guidance of his men, and it gave Floree a much needed break from his amphibian surprises.

As had been expected, Damian excelled in his studies and by the time he was fifteen, he could best many of the younger paladins in both hand-to-hand combat and sword-fighting. His sense of divination was also very strong and he was often called upon by the villagers to help find lost cattle and children that had strayed too far from home. Lucian felt the boy was comfortable for the first time in a long while and Zandalor seemed especially pleased with his progress. Damian seemed truly settled and had been accepted by both the paladins and the villagers as an honourable young man. Lucian knew that retaining this would be the key to Damian’s salvation.

Lucian was still very careful to keep Damian’s history hidden from the boy, however. Growing up was hard enough, without knowing you might be the earthly reincarnation of a demonic entity. Zandalor was adamant that under no circumstances should he find out about the Damned One, especially now he seemed to be flourishing as a paladin. Despite Damian’s talent with a sword, Lucian was also wary about letting him get involved in active combat. A duel in the safety of the barracks was one thing, but out in the wilds, with the roar of battle in your ears and your eyes stinging with blood, was a very different world.

Knowing Damian was in a safe place gave Lucian the chance to leave the farm and embark on longer journeys himself, sometimes for several days or more. He’d found picking up snippets of news here and there, as well as simply making his presence known in the area, was essential for maintaining law and order. Occasionally, he liked to don a large cowed cloak and ride on his own to a local inn at one of the outlying villages. There, he’d enjoy a flagon of ale and a bowl of stew by the fire, without anyone recognising him and demanding that he cure their sore foot. It was just like the old days.

But there were other reasons behind his excursions. Although he was careful not to excite the paladins, he’d started to get the feeling that maybe Zandalor’s knee-pain hadn’t just been the grinding of old bones. Listening to the buzz of inn gossip had convinced Lucian that the Black Ring order were up to something on a scale larger than anything that had been seen since the destruction of the Damned One.

Sightings of known members out in the open also seemed to be on the increase over the last year, although they usually covered their tracks too well to be caught off-guard. These new reports had coincided with Damian’s fourteenth birthday and Lucian somehow couldn’t shift the nagging feeling that the two events were connected. Perhaps the group was taking a renewed interest in the boy, now that he was on the path to adulthood.

The most recent member of the Black Ring order that the paladins had successfully managed to track down was a necromancer called Kalin. He’d been found hiding in the attic of an abandoned house, along with the preserved remains of five children, con-

tained in large glass jars. When they pulled apart the house, they also found several little skeletons that appeared to have been bricked into the walls.

When he'd gone up to inspect the attic himself, Lucian noticed that the bodies in the jars were not those of ordinary children. Here and there on the skin of the little bodies there was evidence of scales, one even had a pair of stubby wings protruding from its shoulder blades and another had a set of claws instead of a hand.

Knowing that, even if the poor creatures had been originally born of human flesh, no parent should see their child in such a condition, Lucian set fire to the attic, sending its unholy contents up in flames. Bringing in Black Ring necromancers was always a gruesome business, but necessary.

Many of the paladins were visibly shaken after going into that attic, and Lucian was glad that Damian had been back at the barracks. But what really puzzled him, however, was how Kalin had managed to get hold of the children in the first place. The necromancer was exceptionally ugly in appearance and certainly no child would ever willingly go to him. Perhaps he simply abducted them while they slept, or possibly another Black Ring member provided them for his experiments. Although they found no evidence in the house to prove that Kalin wasn't acting on his own, Lucian sensed that the demonic cadavers were not the work of just one individual.

Later that same day (Divine justice was always swift) Kalin was brought into the paladins' court for the execution and cleansing ritual. Shackled and at sword-point between three paladin guards the necromancer, instead of recoiling in fear at the approach of the Divine One, spat a black globule of bile into Lucian's face and screeched out a torrent of chaotic incantations. Wiping the bile away, Lucian made a mental note to get a new ceremonial helmet that contained some kind of face guard, as this clearly wasn't the time to find yourself having to scrabble around for a handkerchief!

When Lucian looked at the necromancer, he saw that there was nothing but rot to the core, not one scrap of humanity remained. Despite the thorough persuasion methods of some of his less-than-patient paladins, Kalin had refused to divulge if there were other Black Ring members involved in his experiments. In fact, after a couple of hours in the cells, he'd even bitten off his own tongue to make sure that he couldn't speak, even if he'd wanted to.

Lucian had just drawn his sword to finish the creature, who was now gibbering hysterically, when the necromancer suddenly lurched forward with what must have been the last of his strength and impaled himself on Lucian's blade. As Kalin slumped forward, he pulled Lucian towards him and, with unusual clarity for a man with no tongue, whispered: 'He is coming. He will triumph. Death awaits all who oppose him.'

Usually Lucian didn't tend to pay much attention to those on the business-end of his sword. He knew what they were and what they were capable of. Besides, the way they had lived their lives gave them no reason to be listened to in death. But somehow, the necromancer's words rattled around his head, even as he watched the flames of the cleansing fire consume Kalin's wretched body.

~o8o~

It was during one of Lucian's trips that he first discovered the temple of rifts in the wilderness of Rivellon. Although the Divine One was magically gifted and aware of the existence of rifts, it's probably a good time to point out that the gods' leftover portals are not the only way of passing between worlds. In fact, it has actually become possible to create rifts between two places and travel safe in the knowledge that the place you left from will be the place you return to. Lucian doesn't know all this right now. But he will.

Unknown to Lucian, this technique was pioneered many moons ago by one race in particular, the Raanaar, who inhabit the world of Nemesis and worship the Goddess Raan, the Goddess of war, wisdom and honour – from which they derive their name. These strange-looking creatures are similar in many ways to elves, being both taller than the average human and slender in build. They also possess sky-blue skin of varying tones. Like the elves, they are a fiercely proud and arrogant race, with a naturally haughty look from birth. Even the way they hold their long, thick tails (which, when clad in armour and adorned with spikes, make formidable battle weapons), is enough to make any normal creature feel somewhat unworthy.

It is only elders of this race that are allowed to practice the art of what they call Riftrunning, which allows them to create a temporary doorway to another world that can be open or closed at the Riftrunner's command. The actual procedure for opening the rifts is a closely-guarded Raanaar secret, which is taught only to those who reach the highest levels of their hallowed Academy and prove themselves worthy of this ancient and well-preserved knowledge.

Despite this encroachment into their territory, the gods are more than happy to let the Raanaar open rifts wherever they like, as long as they don't come knocking on their divine door. Besides, Riftrunning increases the potential for misadventure - and the many eyes watching Lucian and Damian were proof of the fact that the gods are never happier than when they've got something to entertain them.

Lucian stumbled upon the temple by accident... or so he thought. He had spent at least a week journeying to an unfamiliar area, past the mountainous region of Tanoroth, where there had been recent reports of Black Ring activity. He had risen early one morning to take Goliath out for a ride to warm him up for the day's travelling. As he was galloping along a valley, nearby to where the paladins had camped, Goliath slowed to a halt and started to paw at the ground with his hooves. Lucian dismounted and discovered that the horse had thrown a shoe, and he was about to walk him gently back to the camp when he suddenly spotted some stonework that was half hidden by trees.

Back in the other realm, a petulant female voice rose in annoyance 'Okay... own up, who threw the horseshoe?!'

The crowd remained silent.

'I'm serious, who did it?'

More silence.

'I see you Trogda, hiding behind that pillar. It was you, wasn't it?'

A small, blue lizard stepped out from behind the pillar. 'Er,' it squeaked 'No, of course not, no, well...maybe a bit, maybe just 'helped' it off. You know, in keeping with the

spirit of things.'

'Look, there's too much interference gone on here already,' said the female voice again.

'Just let them get on with it. They're doing fine on their own!'

'Oh...okay,' said the blue lizard god, hanging his head sadly.

On closer examination, Lucian discovered that the stonework formed what appeared to be the back of some kind of temple. The outside was half crumbled down and covered in creepers, although when Lucian hacked his way round to where he thought the door might be, he found that it was completely free of foliage and looked like it had been used recently. There was even a clear path from the door into the woodlands beyond.

The door wasn't locked and swung open easily, without even a slight hint of an ominous creak. The inside of the temple was dominated by a number of large statues, which Lucian assumed were gods of some sort, all positioned on the edge of a tiled mosaic floor. The only one that Lucian recognised was Arharis, the God of war, with his giant stone hands clasped around the hilt of Stormbringer, his ancient sword that had been forged from thunderbolt iron.

Next to Arharis was a huge figure that had been depicted riding a giant spider and seemed to be playing some sort of pipe that had a big bag attached, from which several other pipes protruded. Lucian recognised it as an imp, but it certainly wasn't any imp deity that he'd ever read about.

The rest of the statues were similarly unfamiliar; some of them were human-like, while others had the bodies or limbs of animals and birds. But one of the strangest statues was right at the far edge of the floor. The figure was in the shape of a male human wearing some sort of small cape and some kind of eye protection. It also had slung across its chest an object that looked rather like a large lute. But it was the position that the figure had been carved in that made it look so peculiar. The statue had its arms outstretched and its knees turned in, as if it was about to fall over. Perhaps it was some kind of magic ritual, thought Lucian as he stared up at it.

As he stood there gazing at the statue, he suddenly felt a slight tugging on his belt and realised that his money pouch had come loose and dropped onto the floor. As he bent down to pick it up, something about the mosaic tiles jolted his memory. When he'd first entered the temple, they'd looked like a jumbled mess of random colours and shapes, but now that he looked closer there did seem to be something familiar about the lines.

Lucian noticed that there were some steps next to the statue leading up to a raised platform that looked like it had once been an altar or a pulpit. The steps appeared to be rather fragile, but he decided it was the only way he was going to get a proper view of the whole floor.

When he reached the top, Lucian looked down. He did indeed recognise the pattern, and a strange chill ran down the back of his neck. It was the same symbol he'd seen in the woods, engraved on the armour of the dead orcs. At the moment this revelation hit him, Lucian suddenly felt himself falling. The crumbling stonework of the platform was giving

way beneath him. He started to fall backwards towards the strange statue, then felt a strange sucking sensation all over his body... and then the temple vanished.

A gravelly voice in the other realm whispered something that sounded a lot like 'ahthankyaverymuch!'

'Look. I mean it, you know!' said the female voice, sharply.

~o8o~

When Lucian opened his eyes, he was almost blinded by colour. At first, he thought he must have hit his head during the fall. But when he sat up, he realised that he was no longer in the temple. He seemed to be standing on some kind of thoroughfare; bodies moved all around him, bathed in shining colours from every angle, like a thousand rainbow flares had been let off at once.

Lucian was pretty sure that he must be dreaming, or perhaps hallucinating, especially when a group of creatures walked past him that seemed to have the bodies of women but the tail and plumage of birds. Their skin sparkled like the stars and one of them kissed him on the cheek, and then pressed a piece of paper into his hand. He moved forward, dreamily mesmerised by the lights and sounds.

'Hey buddy!' A voice shouted. 'Hey, yeah buddy I'm talkin' to ya! Take your medieval ass back to King Henry's Palace and move out the way, will ya?'

Lucian turned to see a man, leaning out of some kind of yellow metal cage, waving furiously at him. Thinking the man had somehow been imprisoned within the contraption, he wandered over to see if he could be of any assistance, but when he got closer it appeared that the man had managed to free himself on his own.

'Look, I've got a fare in the back!' shouted the man, advancing towards Lucian. 'If you don't move right now, *I'm* gonna move you, understand?' The man pushed him backwards, roughly. A little angered by this behaviour, Lucian waved a hand vaguely, with the intention of casting a minor force-field and protecting himself from this nuisance.

'Don't you wave your hands at me, Buddy! And tell your mama to sew you a better costume, this one smells like something outtuva museum!' The man pushed him again, this time with more force, and suddenly Lucian was lying on the floor of the temple. He rubbed his head and got to his feet unsteadily. Leaning against what remained of the steps for support, he tried to make sense of what had just happened.

A hint of colour at the base of the statue suddenly caught his eye. When he picked it up, Lucian realised it was a crumpled piece of parchment which read: 'Two 4 One meal deal at King Henry's Palace 2nite! Buy one banquet dish, get one FREE! Don't forget 2 drop in and see our world famous 'Oooh la la!' dancers all the way from Paris, France. Children welcome.'

Despite the fact that Lucian couldn't actually read the language, the piece of parchment was enough to prove to him that what he'd experienced hadn't been a dream, but the results of falling through a rift. Although Lucian had never seen a rift before, he was aware of their existence. After he'd killed the Damned One, he'd spent nearly six months with Zandalor being brought up to speed on the history and practices of Rivellon. He'd learned that rifts were extremely rare and only occurred where the dimensional walls were thinnest, and that they could only be accurately detected by those with the exceptional gift of rift-sight.

Zandalor had been doubtful that, despite Lucian's powers, he would be able to

see or even sense these rifts. His magic, rather than having been acquired when young, or born with him in his blood, had been bestowed upon him later in life. This meant it was highly unlikely he would have the gift of rift-sight.

This hadn't presented a problem as far as Lucian was concerned. He had enough to deal with in the world he was currently in, without worrying about what might be happening in others. But now that he'd accidentally discovered one of these rifts, he felt compelled to find out more about them.

After recovering his strength enough to walk properly, Lucian headed for the door of the temple. But as he passed one of the other statues, he felt his arm being pulled towards it and a tingling feeling running down the side of his body. He stopped and moved slightly nearer the statue and slowly extended his arm. Suddenly, his hand disappeared through the statue and felt as though it was being sucked into quick-sand. Lucian pulled it back sharply and there was a sound like a snail being pulled off a wall. It was another rift.

Despite Zandalor's pessimism about his lack of rift-sight, Lucian found that passing through a rift and back again seemed to grant him the ability to physically sense others, something the wizard had failed to mention. He still couldn't see them, but if he stood close enough he knew they were there. With a little more investigation of the other statues, he found that the temple contained at least half a dozen more doorways, all of which exuded the same pulling and tingling sensations. It was as if the rifts were not only calling out to him, but were actively trying to drag him through.

After realising that his powers did not work in the world of colour and lights, Lucian was understandably nervous about travelling through other rifts in case it should happen in other worlds as well, leaving him defenseless. Besides, his recent trip had given him a pounding headache and he felt tired and hungry.

Lucian knew he'd stumbled upon a place of great significance. Moreover, he couldn't shake the feeling that the temple would have an important role to play in the future of Rivellon and the war against Chaos. He decided to send word back to Zandalor that he would be staying in the area for a while, just to keep an eye on things.

Not wishing to explain to the paladins about the exact contents of the building, Lucian just gave orders for a temporary camp to be established not too far away from the temple, as well as regular patrol routes around the area. He also cast a net of divine magic over the building to protect it from intruders and, more importantly, to monitor what was happening on the inside of the temple. He certainly didn't want to place any guards in there, for fear of losing them in a rift.

After a few weeks had passed, with no sightings of unusual activities around the temple, Lucian decided to head back home and put his second-in-command in charge of the camp. When he finally returned to the farm, Zandalor was sitting on the steps to the house waiting for him, smoking his pipe and whittling a piece of ash.

'Ah, Lucian, you're right on time,' said the wizard, putting down his carving. 'Let us go in and have a drink and a bite to eat. Hope you've still got some of that honey mead left.'

Lucian gave Goliath some water and a fresh nose-bag, and sat down in front of the fire with Zandalor. He began to tell him all about how he'd found the temple and travelled through a rift.

'I've heard of this place, m'boy, although I've never thought to try and find it. One hears of so many magical things in the world, but I can't just go off gallivanting around at my time of life. The temple is said to be built upon a pivotal weak point, where many dimensions cross. The building acts like a corridor, with lots of doors that lead to other worlds and also to other areas of this one.'

'Do you think it's being used by the Black Ring?' Lucian asked.

'It's possible, yes,' replied the wizard. 'But what worries me the most is that you made it into the temple and through a rift in the first place. You see, although I have never used a rift myself, I have known of others who have done so; a small, secret order known as the Rift Mages. There are only four of them, I believe, all with the gift of rift-sight. It is said that they have dedicated their lives to finding rifts and travelling from world to world, gathering knowledge as they go.'

'I'd always heard that the Rift Mages carefully guarded what few rifts they found, because being able to walk between worlds, or even travel long distances instantaneously, is no minor feat and not to be trifled with. Nothing too visually spectacular, you understand. No armies or giant statues, otherwise that would undoubtedly bring unwanted attention to the place, but I'd expect a few distraction and illusion spells to ward off any potential visitors. So you didn't experience anything like that?'

'No, not in the least,' said Lucian. 'The temple was half hidden by trees, but I didn't feel the presence of any magic, save for the rifts themselves.'

'Most peculiar... most peculiar, indeed,' muttered the wizard. 'I can't imagine that the mages wouldn't have found the temple, it must be their central hub of activity. The only thing I can think of is that something has happened to them, or their spells have been deactivated. Perhaps they took a wrong turn in a world somewhere and couldn't get back. 'But,' he added 'This does suggest that the Black Ring don't know about the existence of the temple yet. I'm sure if they did they would have at least put up some protection spells of their own.'

'Well, my paladins have set up a temporary camp a little way away from the temple,' said Lucian reassuringly. 'I've also placed a divine net over the temple to stop anyone getting in and out, but no one came even close to the temple the entire time we were there.'

'They may just be biding their time. I think I might just take a leisurely journey up there myself. I have friends in the area. If the temple's defenses have been weakened, then anyone might stumble into it. Worse still, the Black Ring could get hold of it, if they haven't already, and if that has happened then they will have something of great power in their hands.'

‘I don’t know how much use it will be to them, my powers certainly didn’t work when I went through the rift into the other world,’ said Lucian.

‘Well, I can’t say I’m that surprised, m’boy. You have power in this world because it is a place where magic is embraced, but not all worlds are like that, so I’ve read. Some have chosen another discipline over magic, with very different energies. Although magic may be present in these worlds, unless it is truly accepted by the inhabitants it will just drift around unused. Undoubtedly this leaves them closed to the reality of dimensional doorways, which is why we haven’t seen any of the creatures from the world you speak of, in Rivellon.’

~o8o~

Lucian’s paladins continued to report back that no unusual activities in the area had been detected. Not a soul had even attempted to come close to the building and Lucian’s protection net had not been tampered with.

But the rift temple hadn’t been the only thing worrying Lucian. After his return to the farm, he called a meeting with the paladins that had remained behind at the barracks, to inform them about the temple and find out what had been happening in his absence.

Noticing Damian was missing from the ranks, Lucian enquired as to his whereabouts and was told by one of his Sergeants that the boy had got himself a lady-friend a couple of villages away and had been spending more time away from the barracks. He’d also become more surly in temperament and had even started to dodge his chores and, with Lucian away, the paladins didn’t think it would be wise to try to discipline the boy themselves.

After conducting a bit of questioning in the area, Lucian learned that the girl Damian was seeing was a young witch named Ygera. While Lucian didn’t have a problem with witches in general, who were either skilled healers, herbalists, or just pale girls who wore too much eye make-up, he knew that these ladies sometimes dabbled in unpredictable, wild magic and he wasn’t too keen on Damian being around such influences.

When he finally managed to track his son down, he started to question him about Ygera. But instead of talking to the disciplined and poised young man he’d left behind a few weeks ago, Lucian found himself talking to an awkward boy, who shuffled his feet and blushed furiously.

‘It’s not that I mind you seeing this girl,’ Lucian lied, ‘but I will not allow you to shirk your chores and training.’

‘What’s the point?’ moaned Damian. ‘I shouldn’t still be cleaning floors after two years of training. And besides, there’s no one left here who can teach me anything new!’

‘All of us have to take turns in doing the grunt work, it’s just the way things are around here and you know that, Damian!’ Lucian snapped at the boy. ‘So what exactly is this little witch teaching you, then?’

Damian started to look worried. ‘Just a few new spells. Honestly, nothing dangerous. She’s very clever...and beautiful. You’d like her Lucian.’

Lucian softened a little at the boy’s obvious embarrassment. ‘Well then, I’ll have to meet her, won’t I? Why not bring her over for dinner this evening. I believe Floree is baking one of her pies.’

‘Er, okay, I’ll ask her, but she might not want to come. Just don’t let Floree start getting out my baby portraits, please? And don’t talk to her about your job, okay? Please? I really like this girl.’

Lucian smiled to himself. Damian really hadn't had that much experience with women; even the wenches in the village seemed painfully shy of him. Perhaps a little female company would do the boy some good, teach him about other things that were worth fighting for. 'Very well,' he said. 'I will let Floree know she needs to set another place for dinner. Now go and get on with your chores, otherwise I'll give Floree the key to where your baby clothes are stored!'

The boy looked momentarily horrified and then gave Lucian a wide grin and dashed off.

Lucian was half expecting to be dining alone that evening. But just as the sun was starting to go down, a red-faced Damian pushed open the kitchen door, with the new object of his affection in tow.

Despite having met a variety of not-unattractive witches in his time, Lucian was surprised to see that Ygernia was a remarkably alluring girl although, he noted, several years older than Damian. She had a willowy frame, cheek bones you could cut yourself on and auburn hair, which was neatly secured in a long plait that ran down the length of her back. Ygernia was almost cat-like in the way she moved, with unusual grace for someone so young, thought Lucian. When he rose and reached out his hand, her skin felt almost icy-cold to the touch.

What surprised Lucian most was the reaction of Monty to the girl. The dog was usually very friendly to strangers - which made him particularly useless as a guard dog - but as soon as Ygernia came in the room, Monty dashed to the door and barked furiously.

The girl turned out to be well-educated and softly spoken, although the conversation at dinner was punctuated by silences from a hugely embarrassed Damian. Despite his misgivings about her chosen profession, and a general uneasiness that he put down to a typical parental reaction, Lucian felt a little better for meeting the girl. She obviously made Damian happy, and from the way he looked at her, he knew the boy was in love. Besides, it was unlikely at her age that she knew more than a few harmless healing and animal-calling spells.

When the pair excused themselves after dinner to go for a 'walk', Lucian felt a small pang of envy. Floree was an angel to have around, but sometimes he missed the more intimate company of women. In his position, he didn't think it was advisable to try and cultivate any kind of relationship, although he wished that Damian had been able to grow up with a mother as well as a father.

'Youth is truly wasted on the young,' he thought and took himself off to bed with a mug of Floree's homemade herbal tea.

He awoke a few hours later to the sound of shouting outside. He was just about to reach for his sword when he recognised the raised voices as those of Damian and Ygernia. He couldn't quite hear what was being said - unfortunately his divine powers didn't include better hearing - but it didn't sound particularly pleasant and Ygernia certainly had a voice on her when she was annoyed. 'Young love, eh?' he said to Monty, who was curled up at the end of the bed. The dog raised one ear and gave a whine of agreement.

~o8o~

The next day when Lucian rode up to the barracks to look for Damian, he found that his bed hadn't been slept in and none of the paladins had seen him around all morning. Ygera and Damian had either made up, or he was off licking his wounds somewhere, he thought, but either way he was sure the boy could take care of himself.

When Damian still hadn't turned up the next evening, Lucian started to get rather worried and sent out a few paladin messengers to the nearby villages to find out if anyone there had seen him. When no news came back, Lucian decided to ride to Ygera's village himself and find out if the girl knew where he was.

When he reached the village and finally located the witch's cottage, he found nobody at home. He picked the lock, of course, although he suspected he might be playing his parental concern card a little too much. The cottage was small and neat, which was quite rare for a witch, with various herbs and flowers drying from a beam in the ceiling, a large bookcase filled with dusty tomes, a fireplace, candles and a collection of miscellaneous things in jars.

There was a tiny bedroom at the back of the cottage which had a small bed in the corner, more books and another, slightly smaller fireplace. Although the bed didn't look like it had been slept in for several days, the scattering of ash around the hearth suggested that a fire had been lit quite recently.

Lucian knelt down beside the fireplace, swept some of the ash aside and placed the flat of his hand against the stones. He could still feel slight warmth, which meant that the fire was fairly recent. From the way the ash had settled, it looked as though Ygera had been burning a lot of parchment. She'd obviously been in a hurry, since Lucian could still see a few scraps that hadn't been completely burnt.

He picked out a few of the bits to see if he could decipher anything of what had been written on them. It looked like handwritten letters with spidery writing that certainly didn't belong to Damian. He managed to make out a few words, 'house' and 'forest' were two of them, and then he blew the ash off one of the scraps and stopped sharp. 'Damian'. Whoever had written these letters had been writing about his son. The thought flashed across his mind that maybe it was a letter Ygera had written to Damian. Perhaps it was to do with the fight they'd had last night, a letter that she'd decided against giving him. But when Lucian went back into the main room and discovered some of the witch's notes in the margin of 'Herbs of the Marshlands', he became certain that it wasn't her handwriting either.

Lucian started scrabbling in the ash for any more discernable pieces, until he was practically kneeling in the fireplace. As he rose to get up, his head struck a small shelf that had been built into the stonework, used for drying out seeds. When he pulled back, he saw that there were a few scraps of parchment that had landed on the shelf which he hadn't previously noticed. A gust of wind must have blown down the chimney when Ygera set fire to them and had subsequently deposited them there.

He checked them carefully. Most were unreadable and badly charred around the

edges. Only one little piece was legible, although for years to come Lucian would wish that it hadn't been, and suddenly everything made bone-chilling sense. It was Kalin's signature.

~o8o~

A young man's maiden tryst is a precious thing and no matter what happens, those initial feelings of euphoria will leave a permanent mark upon his heart and soul. So it was a real shame that Lucian was going to have to kill Damian's first love.

As he relocked the door behind him, he took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. Ygera would have to be brought in and questioned, but those scraps of parchment were enough to convince him that he'd found the Black Ring member who'd been working with Kalin. She was the secret that the foul necromancer had been keeping. Lucian had no idea whether Damian had realised Ygera's true nature, or the fact that she belonged to the Black Ring. Maybe he had and that was what their fight the other night was about. Despite her neat little cottage and her seemingly shy ways, he knew that she must be a more powerful witch than he first imagined. The Black Ring certainly wouldn't want to take anybody into their ranks who couldn't hold their own in a fight, no matter how fragile they looked.

Lucian had killed off more Black Ring members over the years than he cared to remember: mages, necromancers, orcs, elves, even imps, and almost all without a second thought. The Black Ring was insidious, evil and there was nothing redeeming about them in the least. Being a member was a death sentence, as far as Lucian was concerned. But then, he hadn't ever sat down to dinner with any of them, he hadn't invited them into his home and his son certainly hadn't been in love with them.

He knew that it shouldn't make a difference, but it did. Damian knew what his father was, more or less, and what he did for a living, but Lucian had always tried to avoid getting his son involved in the more brutal side of his work. And he'd strictly forbidden him to attend the execution and cleansing ceremonies - which were a necessary part of ridding the land of the Damned One's influence.

There was no consulting Zandalor on this one - he knew that he'd just point out what Lucian was aware of already: the girl was a danger to the land and a danger to Damian and she must be destroyed. When he got back to the barracks, he gave word that Ygera should be found as soon as possible and taken straight to him for questioning. More than anything, Lucian wanted to find out exactly what the witch knew about Damian and what she had told him. He was sure that none of this would have happened if the boy had become a blacksmith.

Damian still hadn't turned up by the time the paladins brought in Ygera. She had been found hiding in a cave in the nearby woods and had launched a volley of spells at the approaching paladins, one of whom had lost his life bringing the witch down. Ygera seemed a very different creature now to the quiet and genteel girl that Damian had brought home with him a few nights ago.

Her hair was loose, but full of knots and cascaded around her like a red waterfall. The once-feline grace had been replaced by a spitting, snarling wild cat.

'Secure her and leave us alone,' commanded Lucian to Ygera's guards.

'Are you sure, Sir?'

'I'm quite sure, Sergeant. Post a couple of guards at either end of the corridor, but no one is

to approach this door until I say so, do you understand?'

'As you wish, Sir!'

Ygera was seated on a chair, with her arms and legs securely bound to stop her casting any spells. Nevertheless, Lucian cast a protection net over himself and the room, just to make sure.

He wasn't entirely sure what to say to the girl. 'So, we meet again' would be just too much of a cliché and he had to focus on the fact that, regardless of her relationship with his son, she was still a member of the Black Ring and he had sworn to rid the land of their influence. He decided to get straight to the point.

'Ygera, where is Damian?'

'I don't know,' snapped the girl.

'I think you do and I also think you know more about him than you've been letting on.'

'And what if I do, Divine One? Are you scared that he will be even greater than you some day; that the son will overthrow his father?'

'I know you are a member of the Black Ring, Ygera, and I know you are aware of what Damian could become.'

Ygera looked defiant: 'What he 'is', Divine One, what he 'is'. There is no 'could' about it. He is the Damned One!'

Lucian's stomach churned at the very mention of *that* name. Had all these years of teaching really had no impact on the boy whatsoever? He needed to find out for sure exactly what Damian had been told about his heritage.

'What have you told him about where his power comes from?'

'He has heard nothing from my lips. I sought to show him but a fraction of his potential. All you would teach him is parlor tricks and protection spells, you are jealous of his power.'

'Tell me, what were you and Damian arguing about after dinner?'

'He is still a boy. His new powers scared him, but he will grow into them in time.'

If Ygera was telling the truth, then maybe there was still a chance that Damian had no idea about the Damned One's legacy and he could still be steered away from the hands of Chaos.

'I know you were working with Kalin, Ygera. I know you helped him find those children for his experiments. Why did you try to burn those letters?'

'Why?' spat the girl. 'Because I had to watch, as my father became corrupted by the Black Ring. I had to watch him fall from being a great man, to being a slave to their biddings, until he had become one of them. They ordered the experiments and if we had not obliged, they would have killed us as quickly as you killed my father! But there is no redemption for us, nor would I want one. If I had to do it over again I would.'

So Kalin was Ygera's father. Well, that was news to Lucian and, although that didn't excuse her actions, it made her venom towards Lucian more understandable. 'So you

planned to take revenge on me by delivering Damian into the hands of the Black Ring?' Lucian asked.

'No. They had already taken my father from me, you simply finished the job. They wanted me to tell Damian where he'd come from and what he will become, but I would not. Damian will be great, I promise you that, but I will not let them have any influence over him. They squabble amongst themselves, they are greedy and selfish; they are not fit followers for him.'

'Ygern, not only are you a member of the Black Ring, but you have aided in the taking of human lives and, although it pains me, you realise I cannot let you live for that?'

'You can kill me, but it will not stop him. You can kill all of us, and still his power will be realised. Do you really think Damian will understand?'

'You're right, he probably won't understand,' admitted Lucian. 'But in time he will learn to forget you. He is an honourable boy, Ygern. His place is here by my side. He will not turn his back on his life here and his teachings. Not even for a girl.'

'You underestimate him at your peril, Divine One. His power will not remain dormant for long. Once he finds out what you've hidden from him and what you have taken, he will hate you for it.'

~o8o~

After Ygern had been taken back to her cell and the paladins ordered to set up the chamber for the execution ceremony, Lucian slumped into the chair. He knew that the girl was probably right, that Damian would never understand. How could he be expected to - how could anyone? It wasn't as if he was a kid any more and he could hardly just distract him from the fact he had killed his lover, by buying him a puppy or a big bag of sweets.

But he knew he had to do it. It didn't come down to a matter of choice, it was his duty. For the first time, he felt that he utterly loathed his work and the divine position the universe had kindly decided to drop in his lap. Still, this was the price he had to pay for not killing the boy when he had found him on the altar as a baby. He'd known then that his decision would someday cause blood to flow, one way or another, even if it wasn't Damian's own blood. He had made his choice then, and there could be no going back. It was time to pay the piper.

Damian's absence was some consolation; it certainly made the task more bearable, if nothing else - although he was determined to turn his full attention to finding the boy once the ceremony was over. Lucian tried to talk himself into believing that, once the boy was found and it was explained to him how Ygern had been involved with the killings of those children, Damian would be fine. Devastated; but fine. Emotionally ripped to shreds, but essentially fine. He would be okay... probably.

Lucian didn't feel like moving. He'd just stay in his chair until one of the paladins came to fetch him for the ceremony. Then, all it would take was one swift blow with his sword, something that he'd done thousands of times before, and it would all be over - although Lucian had an uncomfortable feeling that it had only just begun. Time began to slow down to a crawl as Lucian sat in the middle of the room, his chin cupped in his hands, waiting for the inevitable summons.

He had performed countless executions since he had assumed the role of the Divine One, but for the first time, Lucian could feel his heart beating in his chest when he entered the chamber a few hours later. Usually, he was much calmer about this part of his duties, just wanting to get the job out of the way and take a long walk in the fresh air. He'd learned to emotionally harden himself against the crying, the begging and the fevered recantations, but he knew that this one would truly test his mettle.

He felt slightly cowardly for blindfolding the girl, although he wished that he, too, didn't have to see what he was about to do. Unfortunately, convention and safety dictated that, at the very least, the blade-wielder should actually have their eyes open.

The guards didn't even need to push Ygern to the floor. She quietly knelt down before him, with her head bowed. There was no noise, no fuss, no pleading for a second chance. It seemed as though the girl was resigned to her fate, even if Lucian wasn't.

As he raised the sword, its blade seemed heavier than ever and it was a weight that pressed down against his whole being. As he brought the sword down in a high arc, Lucian found himself silently praying that Ygern would find her own peace somewhere, where the Black Ring could not reach. There was a soft thud as her head separated from her

body and hit the floor. Then the blood started to flow across the stones, mingling with the swathes of red hair.

As Lucian looked up, thankful at least that the task was over, he saw that all the eyes in the room weren't on him and Ygera's fallen body, but rather on the entrance to the chamber. The doors had been thrown open, although Lucian could have sworn that he didn't hear a sound, and standing in the doorway was Damian, his face as white as a sheet. The boy stood there for a few moments, his fists clenched tightly by his sides, not making a sound. Then he simply turned and walked away.

Lucian dropped his sword and ran to the door, but the boy had gone. Because most of the paladins had been at the ceremony, no one had seen Damian enter or leave. It was as if he'd just melted away. Lucian fell to his knees and cursed. It was too late; there would be no gentle explanations now, no 'plenty more fish in the sea' chats. The boy would make up his own mind.

'Well, that was a stroke of luck, for a moment I thought he was going to miss it.'
'Did you see his face?! Ho, ho what a look! Ooooh he's really mad now; that Lucian is going to get it good and proper!'
'I can't see, I can't see, will someone lift me up please?'

'This is going to get good. This is going to get really good! I think I'm going to cancel that war I've got scheduled for next week. This is going to be much more interesting.'
'I don't like that Damian, he's got shifty eyes.'
'Well I think that Lucian is just a boring do-gooder, he never does anything REALLY fun!'
'Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me? I can't see Rivellon.'
'Oh, will someone PLEASE just lift it up and stop the stupid thing poking my knee!'

~o8o~

'You can't just let him go, Lucian!' growled Zandalor, who was in an especially bad mood at being called out of bed in the middle of the night. Lucian noticed he still had his slippers on. 'I'm sure it must have been very traumatic for the boy seeing Ygera die like that, but he can't be allowed to just wander around unchecked. The gods only know what sorts of things she taught him, and told him, I'll warrant!'

'She said she didn't tell him anything about where he came from, although the Black Ring wanted her to,' explained Lucian.

'And you believed her?! More fool you, m'boy! She's a witch and a child killer, what makes you think the words she spoke would be anything but foul lies?'

Lucian sighed: 'Because, Zandalor, I am not entirely without gifts when it comes to seeing the good in people!'

'Well you certainly couldn't see the bad in her, could you, eh? Eh?'

'She was in my house!' snapped Lucian. 'She sat down at my table and ate my food, Zandalor, and I wasn't about to give her a moral shakedown over dinner - especially in front of Damian!'

'You're too soft. That's your trouble, Lucian!'

'Look, this isn't getting us anywhere. I've got half of my paladins out looking for him. I can't do anything more until he is found.'

'Well ready yourself, Lucian. Damian's knowledge about his power has increased and I'm certain that will have changed him in some way. Do not assume he is still the boy you once knew. If he finds you first, you need to be ready for him. If evil has truly surfaced within him, then it is you, Lucian, who he will come after. And you know what you must do if that happens.'

Lucian did, although he wasn't comfortable with the idea one bit. Killing Damian now would be like an acknowledgment that his teachings over the last fifteen years had failed; that chaos had triumphed over order. Then, something sparked in his mind: there might be another way to rid Rivellon of Damian and cleanse the boy at the same time, without resorting to more bloodshed. He kept his thoughts silent. Zandalor would never understand what it was like to contemplate the task of killing someone who, although not of the same flesh, Lucian considered in every way to be his son.

If what Zandalor said was true, then Damian might be out to seek revenge on him. Perhaps only on him, for he was the one who had killed Ygera. What if Lucian could use himself as bait and lure the boy to a place where the rules were a little different?

After a week had gone by with no sign of the boy, Lucian decided to put his plan into action. He gave Monty to Floree to look after and sent her off to stay with her sister in a nearby town. After casting a strong protection spell over his home village and ordering a

few of his paladins to stay and maintain order, Lucian made a very visual spectacle of moving the rest of the army out of the barracks and towards the site of the rift temple.

It was a risk leaving the village, but inside Lucian sensed that Damian's target would be wherever he was. There was still a temporary camp at the temple site, which would serve well enough, and he didn't think it would take long for the boy to make his appearance.

And he was right. A few days after the paladins had settled at the new camp, Lucian got word that Damian had assembled an army of Black Ring members and was moving with speed towards the temple. Lucian was sure that if the Black Ring had got hold of him, then Damian would know everything - and the fact that he had amassed a force suggested he wasn't dropping by for a friendly chat.

When dawn broke the next day, Damian's army came into view on the horizon. The boy was leading them, saddled on the back of a giant wolf. Behind him was an entire compendium of evil: necromancers, orcs, mages and dark warriors - they had all turned out for the occasion. Lucian noted that the odds were fairly evenly matched between the two forces, though Damian had pure hatred on his side and that was a powerful weapon.

Damian's dark army paused. The boy seemed to be addressing them; his lupine steed paced up and down in front of the ranks.

'You know what to do, men' shouted Lucian to the paladins. 'There is not one amongst you who I would not call a friend, and now I urge you, my friends, to take heed when I say that the boy who was once one of us has gone. Do not be fooled by his visage. Take arms against this sea of evil before us, but leave Damian to me. You fight with law and order on your side, paladins, and these virtues will be triumphant on this day of reckoning.'

Both sides surged forward and met with a clash of weapons and an explosion of spells. Lucian waded in on Goliath, his sword whirling around him in a blaze of shining metal. It was certainly a while since he'd been in a battle of such proportions and he was almost starting to enjoy himself, when he realised that Damian was missing.

~o8o~

Lucian paused briefly to chop off an orc's head and pulled Goliath out of the fray. He tried to see where Damian had vanished to. Then he spied him, a little way off, attacking a group of paladins who had become separated from the main force. Damian seemed oblivious to the fact that these were the same men who had protected and played with him for most of his life. Fire flew from the boy's fingers at a speed and intensity that Lucian had never witnessed before, and one of the paladins screamed as his armour started melting onto his skin.

Spurring Goliath forward, Lucian rounded on Damian and cast a bolt of white light in his direction. The bolt struck Damian and he lurched in his saddle. Lucian knew that the bolt was sufficiently low in energy to do no more harm to the boy than wind him, but it would be enough to distract his attention.

'Damian!' shouted Lucian. 'Leave them alone! If it's me you want then come on, why waste time?'

Damian turned to face him and, throwing his hand back over his shoulder, sent a ball of fire streaking towards the remaining paladins, then galloped towards his father. But Lucian wasn't about to face him here in the open and he urged Goliath round and headed for the entrance to the temple.

'That's right, Damian,' thought Lucian 'follow me. I don't need an audience for this.'

He'd removed the spells from the temple and, now that all the paladins were on the battlefield, the area was deserted. At the bottom of the steps he quickly grabbed his sword, dismounted from Goliath, stroked him on the neck, whispered 'Get out of here, boy' and slapped the horse's rump.

Damian galloped up a few seconds later - even the speed of a demon wolf was no match for the Divine One's warhorse. The boy practically fell off his mount in his eagerness to get to Lucian.

'Why did you do it?!' screamed Damian. 'Why her? Why couldn't you let us be happy?!'

'She was a murderer, Damian. A killer of innocent children,' retorted Lucian, holding the boy off with a shield spell at the same time as back-stepping his way towards the temple.

'She was just protecting her father. She knew that if she didn't do what the Black Ring wanted, then they would kill them both. Now you've made me go to them, Lucian. You made me do it. They told me who I really was and what you have been hiding from me all these years.'

'I did that for your own good, Damian. I did it to protect you from yourself.'

At this, the boy cast a few fire-balls towards him, which bounced ineffectually off the protection shield. Lucian could feel the power behind them, though. It was like the boy had been given a weapon that was too heavy to lift, but every time he struggled with it, he seemed to grow in strength.

‘You did it because you were afraid I would become greater than you. And I will, Lucian, I will. When you killed Ygera, you took away my right to choose. And now there is no choice to be made anymore!’

‘There is always a choice, Damian,’ shouted Lucian and then realised that he was exactly the wrong person to be saying that. Had he really not had a choice in killing the girl?

By now, the pair had reached the doorway of the temple, which Lucian had deliberately left open. Already, he could feel the rifts a little way off on either side of him, causing his skin to tingle. All he had to do was get Damian close enough and then apply the appropriate momentum.

Lucian reduced the magical energies on his protection shield just enough, so that when Damian cast his next spell, which was an ice spear, the point penetrated the shield and struck an arm. Lucian winced at the blow, though it wasn’t really hard enough to do more than bruise him through his armour. He wanted to give the boy the impression that his powers were weakening. Damian looked triumphant when he saw the spear hit and started to advance on him.

‘You should have killed me when you had the chance,’ he spat. ‘Day by day I grow more powerful, while you grow weaker by clinging to your pathetic values of law and order. Can you not feel it, Lucian? Can you not feel the world moving in my direction?’

Lucian knew that the creature before him, that had mercilessly killed the people he’d grown up with, was a world away from the kind and noble son he once knew. It was only his boyish visage and the thought that there might still be a scrap of humanity remaining within him that prevented Lucian from destroying him for good. In Rivellon, the boy was lost to him, but perhaps if he was safely secured in another world, away from the influence of the Black Ring, things would be different.

It was now or never. Lucian pulled himself up to his full height and let the power surge back into him. Energy crackled from his finger tips and he cast a net of pure divine power around the startled boy. Then, with the net safely secured to his magical core, Lucian took a short run-up and threw himself through the nearest rift, dragging Damian with him.

As he left the world of Rivellon, he could have sworn he saw the imp statue above the rift wink at him, and in the dappled light of the temple the fur on the imp’s spider steed seemed to ripple gently.

‘Hurrah!’ said a high pitched voice, after the two figures had vanished. ‘Me like, me like!’

‘Oh good grief, who woke him up? I tell you, if that spider even *looks* at me funny, it’s going to lose a leg. Okay?’

Lucian hit the ground first and then Damian tumbled after him. The divine net was still wrapped tightly around him, pinning his arms to his body and the boy looked like he was unconscious. Making a mental note of where the rift doorway was, Lucian picked up

Damian’s body, slung it over his shoulder and ventured into the rocky wilderness of the new world.

He must have carried the unconscious boy for at least an hour by the time he decided to set him down. Damian was still out cold. Laying the boy down, Lucian summoned the rest of his powers for one final spell. As he invoked the divine forces a white halo of fire appeared all around his body.

‘By all that is Divine, I imprison you in this world Damian until I or one of my followers wishes you to leave. This is my word and it shall be so on this day.’

The spell left the Divine One and transferred into Damian’s unconscious form, slightly lifting his body into the air before gently releasing it back onto the ground.

It was highly unlikely that Damian had acquired rift-sight in his absence, which meant that he wouldn’t be able to see or sense the doorway back to Rivellon. Even if he could see a doorway, then the spell would prevent him from actually passing through it.

With any luck, it would also wipe out most of his memory for a while, save for possibly his own name, and when he regained consciousness the boy would be able to start afresh in a new world. The spell should also render him powerless, as he would no longer have the knowledge to remember his spells. He would be alone, defenceless and undoubtedly afraid, but at least he wouldn’t be dead.

He gazed down at Damian and remembered how small and frail he had once looked, sleeping peacefully in his crib. Now, despite living for so long under the influence of the Divine, the Damned One was struggling back to his full power through the life force of this boy.

As Lucian walked back to the doorway, he tried to steel himself with the knowledge that Rivellon would now be safe. He knew that, in Zandalor’s estimation, he had just failed in his duties for a second time by not killing Damian. Even so, he knew that he would never, *could* never see his son again and on the inside, his heart was breaking into a thousand pieces.

~o8o~

Elder Anlokar was woken from his nap by a frantic knocking at his study door. ‘Come in, come in, before you break the door down,’ he grumbled to the knocker.

The Raanaar Captain stepped into the room and Anlokar could tell, from the way his tail was vibrating from side-to-side, that the creature was in a frantic state. ‘High Elder Anlokar, I respectfully ask for your presence in the Great Hall. The patrols have found a young male human wandering in the wilderness. He appears to have no recollection of how he came to be here.’

‘I’ll be there directly, Captain. Just give me a few moments to wake up properly, will you?’

‘Certainly, High Elder. We shall make him comfortable and await your arrival.’

Anlokar nodded to the man as he left the room and proceeded to gather his thoughts a little. Back when he was a younger Raanaar, he used his Riftrunning ability to explore various worlds, many of which contained humans. But the running of the Academy took up so much of his time these days that he rarely opened a rift, and it had certainly been a while since he’d seen a human up close.

When he entered the Great Hall a short while later, Anlokar saw that the male human was quite young at around 15 or 16 years of age - which, by Raanaar standards (who tend to live as long as elves), was practically a baby.

‘Has he remembered anything at all yet?’ enquired Anlokar to the Captain.

‘Only his name, we think. He keeps repeating the word ‘Damian’ over and over again. A curious title if ever I heard! Oh, and the place he comes from, Rivellon. The child doesn’t seem to have much more to say for himself other than that.’

‘Let me talk to him for a bit.’ said Anlokar.

Although the laws of Riftrunning prevented the Raanaar from interfering in the affairs of any other world that they travelled to, removing objects or causing disturbances, language was one area in which they were permitted to indulge. Subsequently, the Raanaar had become fluent in many inter-world languages, including different human ones.

When Anlokar spoke to Damian, he recognised his language immediately, although exactly why he had turned up in Nemisis was unclear. The human himself didn’t seem to know, which suggested to the Raanaar that perhaps the creature had accidentally wandered into a rift. He knew there were a few that lead to Nemisis. That didn’t explain his memory loss, though. That certainly wasn’t symptomatic of rift travel. Still, this ‘Damian’ looked harmless enough. In fact, he seemed more frightened than anything else, as he sat huddled in one of the big chairs with a blanket wrapped around him and his hands cupped around a mug of hot Floogefrog milk.

The High Raanaar Elder immediately felt sorry for the boy. Rift travel could certainly be disorientating, especially if you only walked into one accidentally and didn’t know

what was on the other side. Not that the Raanaar ever willingly travelled through a rift when they didn’t know its destination. He’d read in one of the history books in the Academy library that, during the earlier Riftrunning experiments, many Raanaar had been lost that way. These days, rigid use of rift co-ordinates helped reduce the chance of fatalities.

He gave the boy a short time to recover and then began to open a rift to Rivellon to send him back home. He led the child gently towards the rift and gestured for him to go through it. When Damian tried, it was as if he’d walked into an invisible barrier and he practically bounced off the rift as if it was made of rubber. He tried again and the same thing happened; he simply could not pass through the rift.

‘How odd, I’ve never seen that happen before in all my years. Perhaps I’m just a bit rusty at Rift opening. Elder Anlollum would you do the honours please?’

The Elder also tried opening a rift and, when Damian tried to pass through, yet again he came up against the same resistance.

‘We’re obviously not getting anywhere with this,’ said Anlokar. ‘Please make the human comfortable in my quarters. He can stay at the Academy until we figure out what to do about this.’

‘Are you sure that’s wise, father?’ said a stern voice behind Anlokar. The voice belonged to Anlokam, daughter of the High Elder, who was studying to become a Riftrunner herself. ‘We have no idea why he’s ended up here. He could be a danger to the Academy.’

‘Nonsense, Anlokam. Look at him; he’s just a frightened child, alone in the world. For Raan’s sake, show some compassion for your fellow creatures, my dear.’

‘He’s no fellow of mine and I just don’t think it’s wise to take him in, father. Remember that baby fire lizard you found with a broken leg, which you wanted to teach to warm your quarters? It took weeks to get the scorch marks off the ceiling and I don’t think the librarian has ever managed to replace his book on unicorn wrangling!’

‘Well, how can I concentrate on my paperwork if my feet are freezing?’

‘You nearly didn’t have feet at all, Father!’ snapped Anlokam. He was a kind and generous High Elder and intensely proud of the Academy and the Raanaar Riftrunners, but it was amazing how he’d always had the capacity to make her feel like the parent, while he acted like the child. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him go through a rift, yet he still managed to retain a spirit of adventure and childlike wonderment at the twists and turns of life. It was remarkable for a Raanaar of his age.

‘No, I have made up my mind Anlokam. Damian will stay with us in the Academy for now.’

Anlokam sighed loudly at her father and bounded out of the room, her tail swishing violently in disgust.

Anlokam's mood didn't improve when a few weeks later, after Damian had failed to regain any more of his memory, the High Elder announced to his daughter that he was going to propose that the boy study at the Academy alongside her, in order to become a Rifrunner.

'Don't worry, my dear,' he said, when she once again voiced her concerns about the boy. 'Damian seems keen to learn, the way he's picked up our language is astonishing and he's practically been living in the library this past week. The Head Librarian says that he has never seen anyone with such a vociferous appetite for knowledge. Besides, what are we going to do with him otherwise? We can't just shut him out in an unfamiliar world, now that we've taken him in. Besides, I think if Damian learns how to open rifts himself, it may very well solve the problem he's been having getting back to Rivellon.'

'I have to admit that he does have a certain charm about him. And he is very intelligent, for a human. But he needs to learn more about our ways of behaving and stop doing things like teasing the imp servants all the time.'

'Well, who in all honestly hasn't teased those little creatures at least once in their life? Come on! They're so silly and gullible that it's hard to resist. Besides, as I recall, I myself had to scold you more than once for tying their shoelaces together when you were a young Raanaar, Anlokam!'

'Well, be that as it may,' said Anlokam, rapidly trying to change the subject, 'I certainly don't recall any non-Raanaar having studied at the Academy before.'

'Consider this an experiment then,' said Anlokar, kindly. 'I've been looking for a legacy to leave behind, something I will be remembered for, and training the first human Rifrunner will be perfect. What do you think?'

'Oh, I don't think you'll be forgotten very easily, father,' replied Anlokam mischievously and came over to where her father was standing, linking her tail with his in a gesture of affection and resting her head on the High Elder's shoulder. 'But if you have your heart set on it and you have the support of the other Elders, then I cannot stand in your way.'

Although some of the more traditional Elders raised concerns over Damian being officially accepted into the Academy, most agreed that the boy did show potential and, with the proper training, he would become a fine Rifrunner. So, for the second time in Damian's life (although for him it seemed like the first), he started to train; this time in the ancient art of controlling magic rifts in time and space.

'I tell you, I was beginning to get worried about that boy,' said the nasal voice in the far away place. 'It can't be good to have so much power in just one person, especially a mortal... of sorts.'

The female voice intervened: 'Well, Lucian seems to manage just fine with his powers. I don't know why Damian can't be more like his father. Now *there's* a real man! That reminds me, I think I might take a trip to Rivellon now the fuss is over, perhaps in my beautiful woodland nymph costume.'

The nasal voice came again: 'I don't think someone of your... years should be running

around worlds dressed in three vine leaves and a garland! It's just not dignified for a goddess!'

There were a few muffled giggles.

'Well, at least *I* didn't disguise myself as an ice meteor in order to spy on Princess Felicia, then get stuck in her bedroom chimney and have to wait until she lit a fire before I could escape!'

'Yeah, tubby,' said a voice from the crowd.

'I heard that! And I'm not tubby, I'm pleasantly spherical!'

'Tell that to Princess Felicia!' said another agitator.

'Look, I hate to interrupt this romantic banter, but we've got a demonic entity to watch!'

'Uhhuhhuh... Ladies and gentlemen... ahthankyavermuch!'

'Oh, don't you start!'

~o8o~

Damian proved to be a model pupil and excelled in all his studies at the Academy, including everything from summoning and protecting yourself from creatures, to the ethics of rift-opening. In fact, his constant success had started to grate on Anlokam's nerves after a while. She had already been studying Riftrunning at the Academy for quite some time before Damian appeared. Now, not only was he at the same level as her, but it looked like he might actually get put into a higher class.

She tried to look favourably on the fact that, whenever the High Elder heard praise about Damian from one of his tutors, he would beam with pride and call him the 'son he'd never had.' It made her feel jealous, but she kept this to herself as jealousy was a trait that the Raanaar actively discouraged. It seemed to her that any charm she thought Damian possessed had rapidly disappeared after he was accepted into the Academy and, coupled with his growing popularity, this meant he was rapidly turning into the 'brother she never wanted'.

Neither Anlokam nor Damian had reached the stage where they were allowed to open rifts for themselves, since a great deal of the study at the Academy was theory and methodology. Damian was constantly complaining about how he thought he knew more than enough to open a rift to Rivellon and that the Elders were just holding him back because they had never let anyone Riftrun so soon after entering the Academy. Anlokam wished they would let him open a rift, just so she didn't have to listen to his whining any more.

If the truth be known, by the time Damian was finally allowed to open a rift to Rivellon, she was highly relieved and took pride in the fact that she had managed not to lose her temper with the boy. Not least because that would have been an unseemly display of weakness on her part.

Most of the Academy had gathered to see Damian open his first rift, including many of the students, Anlokam noted with annoyance. Aside from studying, most of them barely had time to sleep and eat, let alone come and watch other students open rifts. Damian opened the rift with the ease of someone who had been doing it all their life and he received a polite round of applause from the onlookers.

But after he had bid goodbye to the Elders and had ceremoniously walked towards the rift, Damian found that there was an invisible barrier blocking his exit yet again, exactly as there had been on his first day in Nemesis. The boy seemed to go completely crazy at this, nearly screaming the Academy down and storming out of the room in a sulk. Although Anlokam wasn't too enamoured at the prospect of having to put up with him for longer, she secretly delighted in his obvious frustration.

From then on, Damian became even more unpleasant to be around than ever and she avoided him as much as she could. The boy seemed to have an almost constant bad temper, mixed with bouts of depression. In a way, she felt a bit sorry for him. He obviously badly wanted to get back to Rivellon, but childish tantrums weren't going to help anyone.

What frustrated her most though, was the fact that her father seemed to be taking

the blame upon himself for Damian's situation and had been spending every waking hour in the library, searching for some reason why the boy couldn't leave Nemesis. He also refused to listen to her when she told him of Damian's bad behaviour around the Academy, saying he had 'more important things to worry about'.

On one occasion, Anlokam saw Damian deliberately strike one of the little imp servants for dropping a pail of water in the corridor and she complained to her father once again (since mistreatment of the servants was strictly forbidden under Raanaar rules). But all he could say was: 'Oh you probably misinterpreted it, daughter. Damian would never do anything more than tease the imps.'

She'd even tried to take matters into her own hands by seeking out the imp who she'd seen being struck. But although she questioned him gently, so as not to alarm the little creature, he seemed to grow afraid at the mention of Damian's name and refused to talk to her any further. Well, even if half the Academy was under the spell that the boy seemed to be weaving, she wasn't - and she would still keep a close watch on the actions of her 'brother'. As an extra precaution, she asked a few of her trusted Raanaar companions who shared her suspicions about Damian, to keep a closer eye on his movements.

~o8o~

The temper tantrums continued for a while, with doors being slammed and the poor imp servants forever having to sweep up broken bits of vases and plates. All this time, her father was still spending his days in the Academy library, until he suddenly emerged one evening and proclaimed that he was going to open a rift to Rivellon himself, to see if he could find out any information regarding Damian's predicament.

With her father gone, Anlokam was convinced that Damian would become more problematic than ever but, surprisingly, the boy seemed to settle down. Now that he knew pretty much everything the Raanaar could teach him about Riftrunning, he started to spend more time exploring outside the Academy walls. He was sometimes gone for a few days at a time, and had apparently been sighted in one of the imp villages, talking to the village Shaman.

It was nice to have a bit of peace and quiet in the Academy again. It allowed Anlokam to finish her own Riftrunning studies, which were only marred by the absence of her father. Alongside the jubilation of becoming a fully-fledged Riftrunner, Anlokam (who was beginning to think she was turning into a serial worrier), still remained anxious about Damian's true motivations. This was especially due to the fact that he seemed a little *too* interested in the Raanaar temple, particularly the holy protection crystal.

The crystal had been put in the temple of Raan, which was located not too far away from the Academy, long before she was born. It was put in place as protection against the creatures that inhabited the demon dimensions. Back then, the demons had discovered a rift in their world that led to Nemisis, and had poured through in great numbers to try and claim the Raanaar's lands for themselves.

A great battle had ensued and many Raanaar were wiped out because the demons were able to draw energy from the demonic planes, which allowed them to regenerate quickly. When all looked lost, a scouting party heard about a meteorite that had crashed in the forest near an outlying imp village. When they went to the site, they found the meteorite had crystallised on impact. Thinking it was a sign, the Raanaar took the crystal back to their temple and offered it to Raan as a token of their devotion to her.

The crystal proved powerful enough to seal the rift between Nemisis and the demonic planes, so that no more creatures could come through. As for the demons that were still left in Nemisis, they found themselves unable to siphon energy from their home world and could therefore be destroyed by persistent Raanaar attacks.

Ever since then, the crystal had been closely guarded by the Raanaar and also enveloped by very powerful protection spells, apart from when it was being cleaned by imps. Aside from a few of the highest Raanaar Elders, no one else was allowed in the crystal chamber, although many Raanaar regularly went to pray in the temple itself. According to her 'observers', even Damian hadn't been able to gain access to the inner sanctum where the crystal was kept, although he had been asking a lot of questions about it.

When the High Elder finally returned, she was anxious to tell him about Damian's suspicious behaviour - even though she wasn't sure he'd take her any more seriously than

the last few times she'd tried to warn him about the boy. But when she went to him, she found him grave-faced and saddened. He shooed her away, claiming he needed to speak to Damian immediately.

As the boy entered the room, the High Elder was sitting at his desk waiting for him. When he saw Damian come in, he locked the door, practically in Anlokam's face. Although she knew she shouldn't, the Raanaar hid nearby, so she was just within earshot of the room.

'As you know, Damian, since you've been here at the Academy, I've come to regard you like a son. You have made me very proud many times over.'

'Thank you, High Elder, but what is this about?' enquired Damian.

'As you know, I have been in Rivellon these past few weeks, searching for some kind of explanation for you being unable to leave Nemisis. When I arrived in the world, I made a few enquiries with some of my acquaintances there and they told me I should talk to a human they called 'The Divine One', or Lucian, as I believe you know him.'

Damian stiffened at the mention of the name, although he tried not to show it.

'This Lucian says he's very familiar with you, Damian, and after I told him how we had taken you in and trained you up, and how you still were unable to leave Nemisis, he admitted that he was the reason why you are trapped here.'

It didn't come as a huge surprise to Damian that there was someone directly keeping him imprisoned here. His memory had gradually started to creep back several months ago, like fog in the night. Lucian's spell had certainly wiped his memory for quite some time, but now he had begun to get images from his past. The memory of someone called Lucian dragging him through a rift was one of the most vivid, but he still had no idea who they were, or why this Lucian had done so.

Nevertheless, he was pretty sure that he still had a long way to go before he'd get his entire memory back. He realised that he would be in a much better position if he just let the Raanaar believe that they were shaping him from scratch, as one of their own.

'Oh,' said Damian innocently. 'I can't say I recall that name, Father.'

'Well, he certainly remembers you. He told me much about your life in Rivellon,' continued Anlokam somberly. 'But what you may or may not have done in another world, before you came to us, is no concern of the Raanaar. We will not get involved in inter-world politics. It is in this world and this world alone that we judge you. Lucian claims to have placed a powerful curse on your head. It will not allow you to leave this place without his permission or the permission of one of his followers - and he does not intend to give that.'

'Why can you not lift it, father? Surely you, as the High Elder, must have the power to at least do *something*.'

'Alas, Damian, his power is much greater than mine. The curse can only be lifted by the

Divine One or one of his own.'

'I don't believe you!' shouted Damian, the blood starting to pump faster through his veins. 'I think you're deliberately keeping me here, to show me off as some kind of experiment, to make you look good. The first human to become a Raanaar! I don't think you want me to leave at all!'

'Now Damian, you know I loved having you at the Academy. But I wish for nothing more than your happiness, in whatever world you choose.'

The High Elder's calm tone just seemed to infuriate Damian even more and he started to pace about the room noisily, knocking over anything in his path. Anlokam heard the raised voice and ran to the door. She began banging on it and calling for her father.

'I will not stay in this place, you can't make me!' she heard Damian scream. Then she heard a strangled cry that she recognised, in horror, as her father's voice.

She began to throw her full weight at the door which, despite being quite solid, started to buckle and flex. Even for a female Raanaar (who were similar in build to the males and certainly their equals physically), she was very strong. When the lock finally broke, Anlokam entered the room and saw the tableau of Damian standing with his hands locked around her father's throat.

'By the grace of Raan, what have you done?!' she cried, as Damian released his grip and the High Elder's body slumped to the floor.

'He wouldn't let me leave Nemisis,' the boy half-whispered as Anlokam rushed to her father's aid. 'I have to leave, I have to leave this place, do you understand?'

Anlokam pulled herself up to her full height, which was substantially taller than Damian, and her tail whipped backwards and forwards menacingly. She edged towards the boy, her eyes full of hatred and pain.

'Stay back, witch!' the boy screamed.

But the Raanaar started to close in on him, mirroring his movements with hers. As they drew closer to each other, it seemed like she had him cornered. Damian fixed Anlokam with an icy look of defiance, picked up a fallen chair and hurled it at her. As she ducked, the boy seized the opportunity, sprinted past the broken door and out into the corridor before she could catch him. Anlokam turned to her father and knelt down beside his limp body. He was barely breathing and not long from death. She knew there was nothing she could do for him now and it was up to her to hunt Damian down and protect the Academy.

'I promise I will find him, father,' said Anlokam, entwining her tail with his and trying to choke back the tears. 'Raan go with you.'

She kissed her father's forehead and bounded out after Damian.

'So much strength,' whispered the High Elder after she had gone. 'He is so angry, so very angry... he wants to break the world.'

Despite scouring the surrounding countryside for several hours with the rest of the Raanaar guards, Anlokam could find no trace of Damian. It was with a heavy heart that she entered her father's study once more, to remove his body for the last rites. She gently closed his eyes and sat on the floor of the study, cradling her father's head in her lap. At last she could cry.

There was a loud sound as the nasal voice blew its nose. 'Oh that's so sad, the poor creature.'

'Oh show some backbone, you big, soft God!'

~o8o~

After Anlokar had been laid to rest in the temple of Raan, Anlokam assumed the title of High Elder and took control of the Academy, as was her birthright. Her first task was to increase the guard level at the Academy and the temple, as well as ordering twice-daily patrols of the area. That final look in Damian's eye told her it wasn't the last she was going to see of him. Well, when he came, she would be ready.

Time passed but there was no sign of Damian. Anlokam knew that he must be somewhere on Nemisis, biding his time. Unfortunately, the Raanaar patrols were getting decidedly bored of scouring the same area, day after day, without seeing a single thing apart from a few imp mushroom-gatherers. They'd even started moaning that they wanted to go back to the Academy and do some studying.

Anlokam took the decision to reduce the patrol groups to once daily, just to restore a bit of harmony among her people. However, she insisted that the guards on duty at the temple and the Academy could not be stood down under any circumstances. In fact, she decided to pay the temple guards an impromptu visit one evening, just to see that they were doing their job properly, and also pay her respects at her father's tomb.

She was glad to see that the guards looked bright and alert at her approach and everything appeared to be in good order. After she'd prayed at the tomb and received a blessing from the High Priestess Ranyanam, she decided to visit the inner sanctum because just seeing the crystal always made her feel alive with energy.

When she reached the chamber, Anlokam was just about to begin a prayer to Raan, when she suddenly felt that something was different. The room was somehow darker. She looked up towards the crystal plinth which usually lit the room with a cool blue light and saw that the crystal was no longer there. In its place was a large, brown mushroom.

'Oh, Damian,' she thought. 'Not the crystal, not the crystal, anything but that.' She rushed out of the room and called for Ranyanam.

'Who's been in that room?' she demanded.

The High Priestess, who wasn't used to being spoken to like that, looked taken aback and answered rather haughtily. 'Why, only the cleaning imps. Have they not dusted properly?'

'You could say they've dusted a little *too* well,' responded Anlokam sharply. 'The crystal is gone, there's nothing there but a big mushroom!'

The High Priestess went almost grey with fright. 'But, but, how could this have happened? I don't understand!'

'Can't you see, Ranyanam? The imps must have taken it and I have a good idea who encouraged them to do it. I thought Damian had been spending a lot of time up at the imp village...now I know why!'

'But to take the crystal, doesn't he realise what that will do to us? Why does he want to hurt

us so badly?'

'There is no time to speculate. The crystal is gone and you know what that means, you've read your history books. As soon as the demons find the rift is open again, they'll come flooding through. You *must* secure the temple at all costs and ready your priestesses for battle. I'm going to open a rift to the Academy and make sure the Raanaar there are prepared as well.'

Mobilising the Raanaar turned out to be much harder than she thought. Many of them didn't know much about the first demon war, while others just thought it was a myth. In the end, she had to get things done in the way her late mother had: by a lot of shouting. In a few hours, she'd managed to fully arm all the warriors and get the mages working on a few powerful mass-damage spells, but she knew her history very well and she was only too aware that she might be leading her troops straight to their deaths.

It wasn't until dusk that the first of the demons appeared on the horizon, sniffing the wind with its fanged snout. It threw its head back and bellowed out a terrible cry and behind it, emerging out of the falling darkness, came hundreds more. They were all different shapes; some looked like giant lizards, others like flying bears, but all with one intent: to crush the Raanaar and their Academy.

'Ready yourselves, Raanaar,' bellowed Anlokam. 'Hit them hard and fast, try and damage them as much as you can. If they come back for more, then give them more! The Academy *must not fall*!'

As the first wave of demons surged forward, the mages, who were lined up on the Academy roof, unleashed an arsenal of spells and lit up the sky with fire, storms, ice-bolts and lightning spears. From her vantage position on the second floor balcony, Anlokam couldn't quite see if the demons were regenerating. She tried to focus on one, a flying-badger demon. It had just been struck full-on by a fire-ball and, as she watched, she saw the creature (which should have been burnt to a cinder by such a spell) get up groggily after a few minutes and take to the air again.

Anlokam could have curled up and died, right there and then. But she knew she had to be strong for the rest of the Raanaar. 'Just keep them busy, Raanaar, they'll have to go and rest at some point. Summon some golems and elementals, and try and draw them away from the Academy walls!' she yelled to the mages and rushed towards the Academy kitchens.

The Raanaar forces may not be able to make much headway in destroying the demons, but at least they could hold them back for a while and buy her some time. And that might just be enough to find an end to this madness.

She burst into the kitchen, where about six imps were hiding under the large oak table. 'I need a volunteer,' she shouted and pulled the nearest imp out by its ears.

'Ow! Ow! What you want, H'Elder? Me frightened by loud bangs! We all frightened.'

‘I need an imp to take a message to the demon commander. Imps are part demon and fast, they won’t be so bothered about attacking you.’

There was some muffled chattering from under the table and then silence.

‘We not stupid,’ said a voice from underneath the table.

‘Please?’ she tried.

There was more chattering and then a little voice said: ‘Me go, H’Elder.’

She looked down and recognised the imp that she’d seen Damian strike all that time ago, the one she’d tried to help.

Anlokam smiled down at the little red creature. She grabbed a quill and parchment and quickly scribbled a note, then sealed it with a little wax and her official High Elder seal.

‘Thank you, little friend. Try and find your way to the back of the demon forces. Look for whoever is in charge and give them this. It’s a note asking their commander to meet me at the temple to talk.’

‘Me go speedily,’ said the imp, who gave Anlokam a small salute and rushed off.

~o8o~

When dawn arose the next day, it did not bring with it the hope that Anlokam longed for. In fact, all it brought with it was the dead body of the imp messenger. The poor creature had been found pinned to the door of the Academy by a spear, with her letter stuffed in its mouth.

The second blow of the day came when she received news that the Raan temple had been besieged by demons during the night and that all inside had been slaughtered. Anlokam was at a loss; her vain hopes of any kind of negotiation had been dashed. The holy temple had fallen, she’d sent an innocent creature to its death and, to make matters worse, the mages were so exhausted they could barely summon up the strength to fight. The demons had closed in on the Academy and some of them had even managed to get into the outer courtyard, where she could hear them fighting with the Raanaar warriors.

Anlokam knelt at the little altar in the basement of the Academy and, with every inch of her being, prayed to Raan for an answer to their plight. In fact, she was so desperate for any help right now that she opened up the prayer to whoever might be listening.

‘Greetings,’ drawled a low voice behind her.

Anlokam spun around and saw that, in the corner of her room draped over a chair, there was a rather overweight demon dressed in a black robe.

‘How did you get in here?’ she demanded.

‘Well, I am a demon you know. Besides, you left the back door open. Oh don’t worry, I didn’t tell anyone.’

‘Are you controlling those things out there?’

‘Afraid not, my dear. Battles are not really my thing, I’m more a lover than a fighter, you see? The name’s Asmodheus,’ he said, in a voice like honey mixed with gravel.

‘Why are you here, Asmodheus? Have you come to mock my people and I in our darkest hour?’

‘No, no my dear, I wouldn’t want to see a pretty little thing like you torn apart by those filthy creatures out there. I’ve come to offer you a deal.’

‘What kind of deal?’ asked Anlokam suspiciously; demons were not known for their ability to bargain, as the little imp body on the door had reinforced to her.

‘Not here, my dear. Let us go back to my place for a more **ahem** intimate chat.’

Without waiting for a response, the demon clicked his scaly fingers together noisily and Anlokam found herself in a room that looked like it had been decorated by one huge piece of red velvet.

‘Take a seat and have a grape, Anlokam. Or try the plums, they’re quite lovely.’

‘I’m not interested in fruit!’ snapped the Raanaar. ‘What do you know about what’s been going on here?’

‘Well I know that your suspicions about young Damian were correct,’ said Asmodheus.

‘He was behind the stealing of that crystal. The boy got the imp Shaman from that little village to dress up as one of the cleaning imps and do the old mushroom-crystal switcheroo. Not very original, I have to say, but it fooled those daft priestesses of yours.’

‘But suffice to say,’ he continued, ‘that I don’t think you’ll be seeing that crystal again for a while. I’ll tell you about that another time, though. Now... how about a peach?’

‘No fruit! You mentioned something about a deal?’

Asmodheus sighed and selected a pear from the fruit bowl: ‘Oh very well, I will make sure that this little Academy of yours is safe, I’ll even drive the demons out and in return, you promise to become my servant for as long as I wish, sound fair?’

As much as she hated the idea of becoming the servant of this loathsome creature, Anlokam realised that she was fast running out of options. Of one thing she was sure: the Academy and the Raanaar could not stand up to the demon onslaughts for much longer, now they’d actually made it inside the walls. The proposal certainly sounded ideal; if the Academy could be saved, then the Raanaar could rebuild their lives again. Apart from giving up her own life, which she was more than willing to do for her people, she couldn’t see a catch.

She took a deep breath: ‘Very well, I’ll do it. I promise. But it needs to be done now, there isn’t much time.’

Asmodheus smiled a broad smile, revealing a mass of discoloured teeth. ‘Excellent, my dear, excellent! Now run along back to the Academy and get your things. When you get there, you’ll find it’s all safe and sound again.’ There was a loud *click* and Anlokam found herself back in the cellar of the Academy.

The sounds of battle had ceased and the place was eerily quiet. She climbed the stairs up to the Great hall and pushed open the door cautiously, then clasped her hand to her mouth. There were no demons, but lying across the floor were dozens upon dozens of dead Raanaar bodies. She picked her way through the corpses, calling out for anyone who might still be alive, but to no avail. The place was a tomb. The demon had lied to her!

Anlokam collapsed in a heap and sobbed, utterly broken. They were tears of sadness, anger and frustration, for her father, for all the dead Raanaar, for everything, all rolled into one anguished lament. Then suddenly, through her tears, she saw a grey shape moving at the end of the hall. Thinking that one of the Raanaar might still be alive, she picked herself up and then stopped in her tracks when she recognised the movement.

It was a ghost; a Raanaar ghost. As she watched, more grey shapes appeared and started floating towards her. The ghosts encircled her and whispered her name. They didn’t seem angry, they just seemed sad.

‘I’m sorry,’ she cried to the grey figures. ‘I tried to save the Academy.’

‘You did, Anlokam, you did,’ whispered one of the ghosts.

‘We drove them out,’ said another.

Anlokam realised that Asmodheus hadn’t lied at all. In fact, he’d kept his word

completely. The demons were gone and the Academy was still standing. There was just no one left to appreciate it. She knew that the demon had her on what he would call a ‘technicality, my dear’ and she had no real choice but to go to him, as promised.

At least she knew that the Raanaar ghosts would keep the place safe. Perhaps other Raanaar would come there one day and benefit from the knowledge encased within its walls. She gathered up a small bag of her belongings and, closing the main door behind her, said: ‘I’m ready.’

‘Of course you are, my dear.’

click

In the other realm, the crowd started to thin out.

‘Is that it?’ said the nasal voice.

‘Oh... well that was rather sad, wasn’t it? And I was hoping for a happy ending,’ sighed the female voice.

‘At least there was a lot of action. And bloodshed, I liked that.’

‘You would!’

‘Uhhuhhuh’ someone muttered in the background.

‘What’s that the King’s saying?’

‘Something about going for a *Holy Hamburger*, I think.’

‘That sounds lovely. I think I’ll join him.’

‘After that, I’ve heard there’s a great story going to happen with this Paladin that’s been soul-forged with a Death Knight!’

‘That sounds like a good one! Let’s go there after the burgers. What say you, Elvis?’

‘Yeah-mumma-Uhhuhhuh!’

‘I think that’s a yes!’

~o8o~

